



# Towards a Visual Literacy: *Bhimayana* and the Caste Problem of India

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**Abstract**— Words tell stories that are readable. When a book is written in words it is available only to those who can read. Caste problem in India has earlier been dealt in verbal mode which appeals only to those who have verbal literacy. *Bhimayana* is an attempt to deal the caste problem in visual medium which approaches even to those who lack verbal literacy. This article argues how with the use of colours, metaphors and subversive pattern, *Bhimayana* has successfully depicted the caste problem in a unique way which has added a greater number of readers. It appeals to the visual literacy to which more people have access. *Bhimayana*'s innovative use of gond painting and its wide range of colours with their extensive metaphorization serve to tell the story from the ground level, from the perspective of the oppressed class. In this paper I have tried to show how the political connotation of the colours help in visual representation of caste and how it demanded for a critical visual literacy in the readers of the novel.

**Keywords**— *Bhimayana*, caste problem, colours, verbal literacy, visual literacy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1988 Hayden White, who coined the term 'Historiophoty', persuasively argued the idea that visual narratives are as much historical truths as historiography. This was echoed by Joseph Witek's influential *Comics Books as History* (1989). Two years after it, Art Spiegelman published his breathtaking graphic novel *Maus* (1991). The book won Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and after this watershed moment the traditional stigma that comics being an inferior medium is inapt to deal with serious issues were gone; rather, it is seen as a prominent form to deal with alternative histories. Spiegelman has chosen the graphic novel form to narrate the traumatic experience of his parents who were Jews and survived the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Spiegelman uses animal metaphors to draw attention to the de-humanization of victims and perpetrators in the genocidal state: his Jews were not persons but mice in the eyes of Nazi cats. The graphic dissonance offered by this novel represented the trauma of the people instead of the conventional mode of representing the trauma of the nation. The trend is set; and

a bunch of artists started telling their narratives of history in graphic style --- Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1993), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010) are a few to be named. Navayana's *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011) is another graphic novel in this tradition. With the help of visual vocabulary depicted through the use of metaphors, patterns and colours *Bhimayana* helped to represent the caste problem of India from a different point of view. Earlier *Amar Chitra Katha* comics has also dealt with the story of Bhim under the title "Babasaheb Ambedkar" where Ambedkar is presented as a cult figure; but *Bhimayana* tells the story of Bhim as a little boy who faces caste problem on a daily basis.

## II. THE STORY

The story unfurls with a preface like setting titled "One Day in the Recent past, a Bus stop in an Indian city" where two persons in an unidentified Indian metropolis are seen

waiting for the bus and begin talking about reservations and Dalits. One of them (who is of course a representative of Upper Caste society) blames the 'quota' system (the policy through which seats in educational institutions and employment are 'reserved' for particular castes and communities identified as historically depressed and marginalized) that 'favours' the Backward and Scheduled Castes. The other one then highlights the historical inequalities and information about continued caste-based oppression in India and the nature of this oppression (denial of equality, violence directed at particular castes). Then she embarks on Ambedkar's story.

*Bhimayana* is divided into three parts. Book One, "Water", describes Bhim's childhood and experiences of caste-based discriminations. Being an 'untouchable', he is insulted in school, made to sit apart from other children, denied water to drink and also lack access to the barber. The narrative also focuses upon the sub-human existence of Dalit life where animals have better rights than them. News reports about violence against 'untouchables' in contemporary India are set beside Ambedkar's story, his arrests and campaigns reported. Book Two, "Shelter", opens with the accounts of an adult Ambedkar. He is now posted as a probationer in the Accountant General's Office in Baroda state, but despite his job and his erudition he is denied shelter in the city of Baroda. He encountered hostility from Brahmins and Parsis as a 'lower caste' and was forced to spend hours in a public garden. His experiences are situated alongside that of several thousand Dalits being beaten, killed and denied basic rights. Book Three, "Travel", is set in Aurangabad in 1934, at a time when Ambedkar is a well-established leader of the so called 'untouchables'. The situation of the 'untouchables' is not much changed. They are still abandoned by the Hindu cartmen and are regarded as 'untouchable' in the eyes of other religion. It also details the Ambedkar-Gandhi differences over equal rights and separate electorates --- Ambedkar wanted equality for all sections in society, Gandhi, on the other hand was more concerned with the freedom struggle. While the former hoped citizens at par, the latter promoted only cosmetic changes to the caste system so that 'untouchables' could also be accommodated within the fourfold structure of Hindu caste system. Tired of the regressive caste system within Hinduism, he eventually embraced Buddhism in 1956.

### III. REPRESENTATION OF CASTE IN COMICS

Caste been presented through graphics earlier by Srividya Natarajan in *A Gardener in The Wasteland* (2011). With

the bold black and white artwork of Aparajita Ninan (which resembles Satrapi's *Persepolis*) the book depicts the struggle of Jotirao Govindrao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule who declared war against a religious system that sanctified one class of people trampling over others deemed to be inferior. In the first chapter of the book, we see how a group of Dalit boys been verbally abused while playing by a person of upper caste. The book corporealizes an alternate history of India through the different interpretation of Aryan-centric mythological stories to understand the caste problem better. Stories of oppression is told by Vishwajyoti Ghosh in *This Side That Side; Restorying Partition* (2010). This is a collection of 40 stories told by the survivors of partition whose voices are marginalized. In Sarnath Banerjee's *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) the historical tales are silently narrated by fringe characters like servants and maids of the British officials whom Banerjee acknowledges as the unsung heroes of history who contributed in their own way for the proper functioning of the society.

### IV. FORM AND PATTERN

*Bhimayana* is another story of oppression told not just in words; the form, the style, the pattern all give space for alternative historiography. It is written in graphic form, that is an amalgamation of images and texts. Graphic form, as described by Scott McCloud in his *Understanding Comics* (1993), is "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". But unlike the conventional panel drawing *Bhimayana* breaks the routine linearity of the graphic novel forms. The book maintains no proportion between texts and images. Images are privileged over texts thus subverting the hegemony of words in a page. Even the speech balloons themselves provide a metaphorical understanding of the text and often text boxes are scattered throughout pages instead of being ghettoed in speech bubbles. *Bhimayana* uses 'khulla' art where there is space for all to breathe. It does not maintain left to right reading pattern rather invents its own pattern of reading up and down. It uses pointing fingers to let the reader understand the flow of narration. Often the reading goes zigzagged and the reader is left with the possibility of reading many texts at once.

The artists Durgabai and Subhas Vyam use Digna pattern as a guideline to create structures. One advantage of using Digna pattern is it does not cut the pages in neat, compartmentalized, square boxes rather crisscross the boxes. Here the boxes take various shapes and often the events in one box overflows to the events in another box. In page 28, the page is divided in 6 unequal boxes and in

the next page the whole page becomes a box (Figure 1 and 2). Thus, the artists instead of focusing on the process of storytelling gives importance to the fluidity of the narrative structure and the pattern of the text.

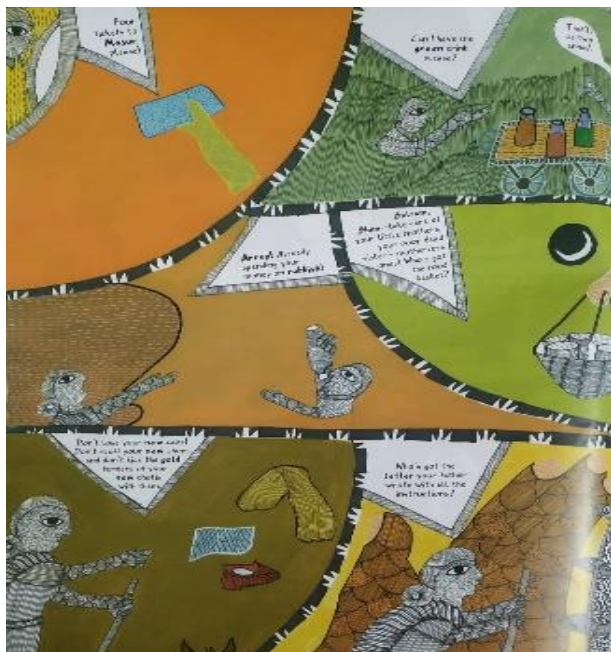


Fig 1: Vyam 28

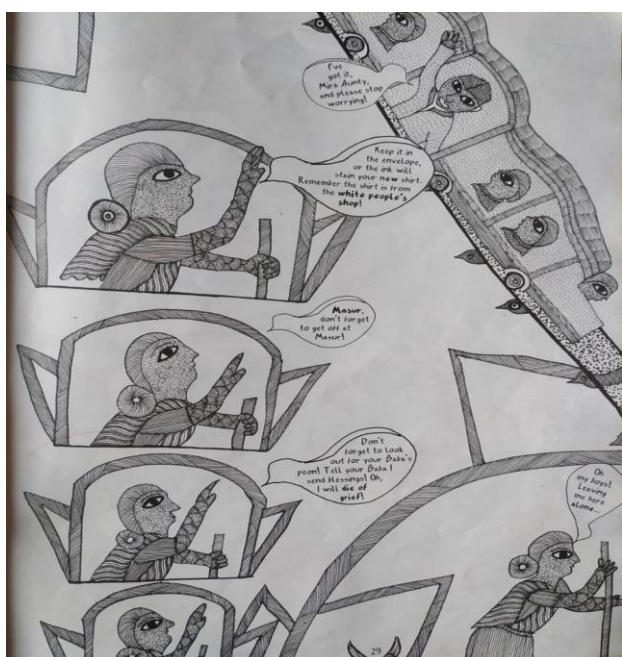


Fig 2: Vyam 29

The texts itself is referential in nature which functions in both a connotative as well as a denotative manner. The meaning does not really emerge only through the characters but takes shape in accordance to the placement of humans, birds, trains, buses, sky, lathi, and

even pointed fingers or staring eyes. Beyond this structural dissonance, the book also employs the newspaper extracts from recent journalism. This unique use of paratexts stitches Ambedkar's experience of discrimination with the present-day caste prejudice where Dalits are bullied and even killed when they try to assert their right to life. All these elements come together to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Dalit existence, their challenges and their resolve to fight back.

## V. METAPHORS

The metaphors and symbolisms used in the text also take part in understanding the problems of Dalit lives in this visual narrative. The book is written with the use of Pardhan Gond art which is rich in symbolism and imagery. In the book, animal imageries are used in abundance to depict the experiences of Dalits. The fish metaphors are especially used to signify the thirst of Dalits for water which they are barred from quenching.

The book opens with two persons sitting on a bench in a public space. The bench is depicted as a smiling person whose legs are stretched out and arms spread out as if inviting the weary to sit and its long extending hair serves as the roof of the shelter. This opening in a public sphere with an inviting smiling face sets the tone of the book. As Joseph Witek says:

A public sphere is a story space that not only enables but also shapes and constrains narrative; moreover, it is not simply a clearinghouse for the publication of personal narrative truth but a kind of story factory in which the norms of public discourse become legible both in the social interactivity of storytelling and in the story forms that it disseminates, conventionalizes, and canonizes.

The recurring fish metaphor is present from the title page of Book One, where Bhim is seen as climbing a yellow fish to reach a blue tube well to quench his inner thirst. Little Ambedkar is seen as taking the shape of a fish in various scenes when he implores for water. Later in the chapter, a water tank whose construction young Bhim's father is supervising in Goregaon appears like a fish containing water, while Bhim is seen contemplating by couching in a fish, which is significantly without water (Figure 3). The other water tanks of Satara are also drawn as fish carrying water in its body. The aquatic representation of events is seen in abundance in the text. In Ambedkar's revolutionary Mahad speech the root of his microphone is dipped within a water body while his voice reaches the audience through



loudspeakers which look like lotus seeds and act as sprinklers (Figure 4). In the next page we see Dalit people has got access to water protected by a fish; in one palm of a hand there is little blue pond where a fish swims freely and in other hand the sea of Dalit people being inspired by Ambedkar's speech now organizing themselves --- this image justifies the historical significance of the Mahad speech which has been compared with the French revolution (Figure 5).



Fig 3: Vyam 25

The most engaging fish metaphor is drawn in page 50 where a massive, ornate fish which bifurcated the panel into the respective domains of the Dalits and the Brahmins. The fish is facing a pond and a bunch of fishes are coming out from the reservoir to the Dalits while a bunch of fishes from the Brahmins are going in the pond. The different direction of movement of the fishes' points to the different narratives of the Dalits and Brahmins. The text in the page refers to the rumors spread by the orthodox Hindus which led to riots. It is important to note that a roaring lion furnished with a menacing set of dentures is used as the symbol of Brahmins while the oppressed position of the Dalits symbolized by a meek cow (Figure 6).

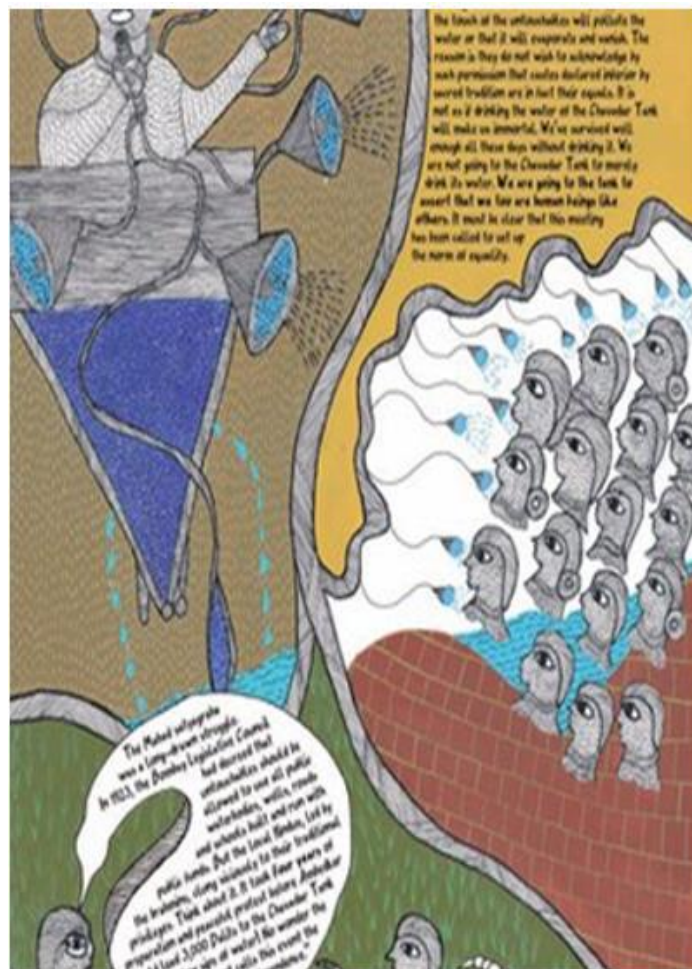


Fig 4: Vyam 48

Later also, the artists took shelter in the fish metaphor to embark on the Chakwara story. The page contains a big fish containing water in its body with Ambedkar's face becoming the eye of the fish. In the left side are the Brahmins and on the right side stands the Dalits accessing the water alongside the Brahmins. The fish carrying water in its body is also significant. In the page 17, the fish is yellow, that is, it is out of water or has no access in water and Ambedkar climbing it to quench his thirst. But here, Ambedkar has become the eye of the fish-- his vision to eradicate untouchability has alleviated the position of the Dalits who now has access to public water. The fish is no longer thirsty yellow, rather it has turned to satisfied blue (Figure 7). The fish metaphor is also used in the very font style of the book designed by artist Roshni Vyam. This font style has been named after Ambedkar and is called Bhim font. This fish style has ingeniously connected the fish metaphor with Dalit existence.

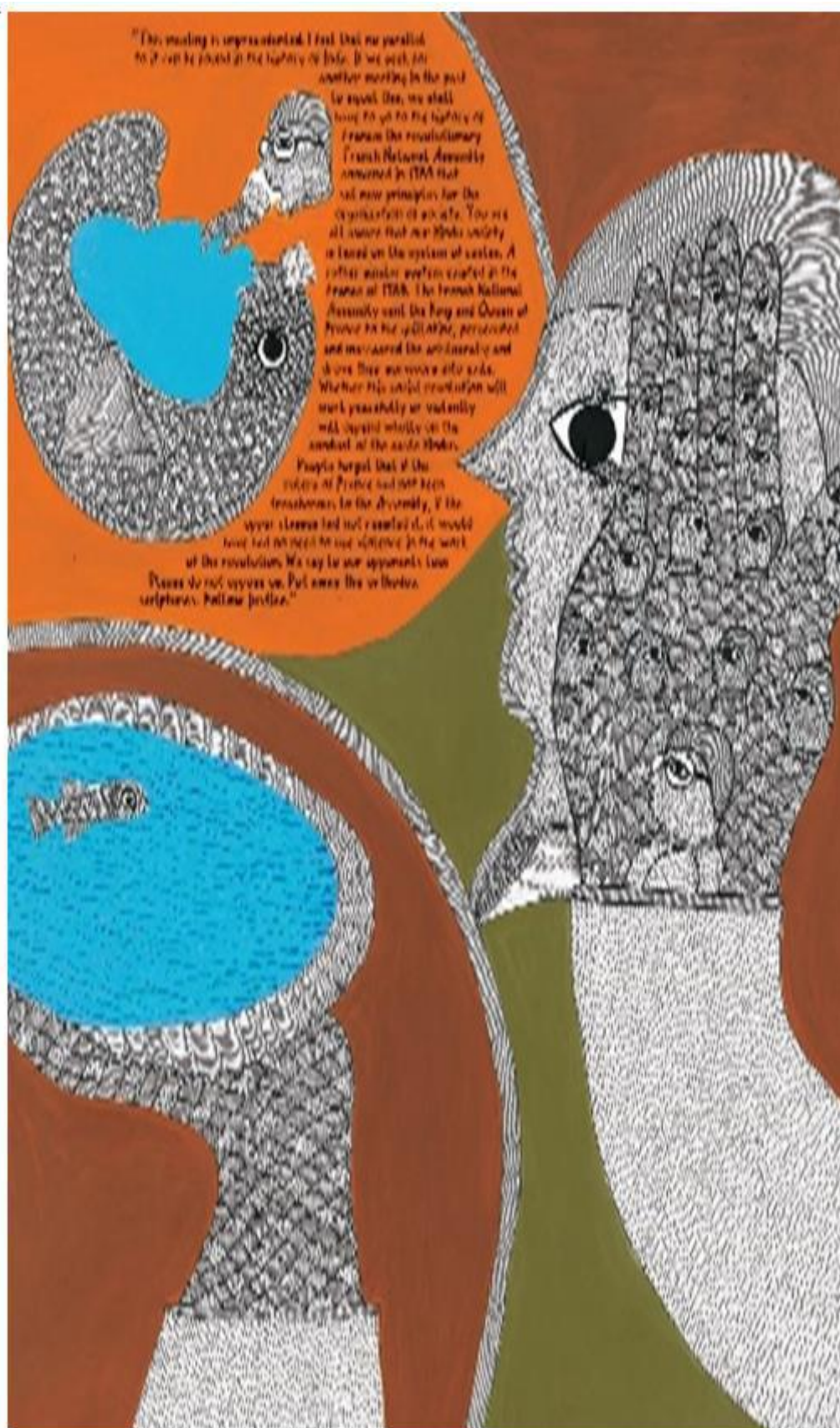


Fig 5: Vyam 49



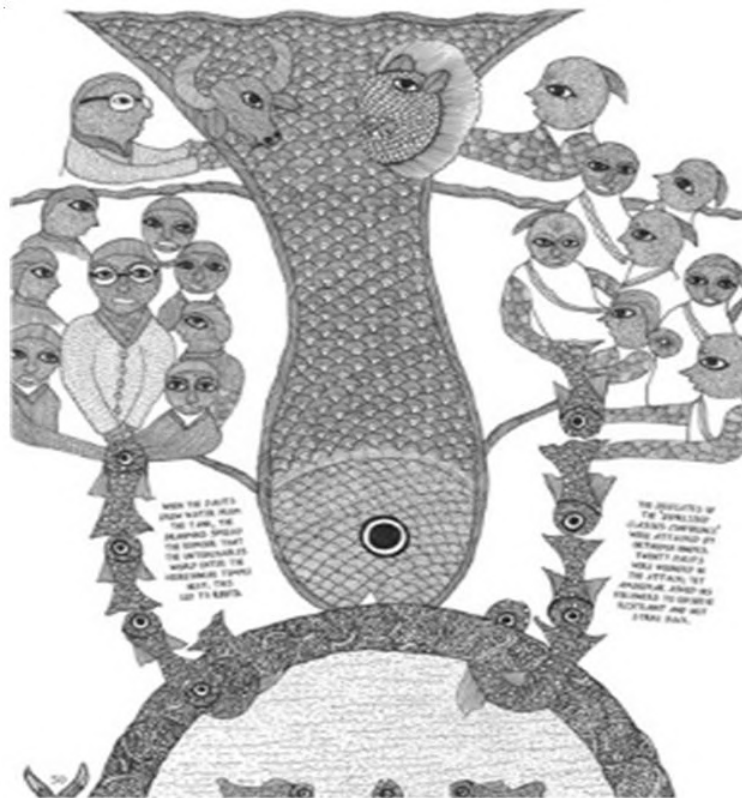


Fig 6: Vyam 50



Fig 7: Vyam 54

Along with the fish imagery, other imageries are used in the text to tell the caste history of India. The flow of water, the turning of wheels and the clocks in the pages are symbolic of the timelessness of caste system. The pointing figures used to accuse the oppressors, the tube well turns to angry elephant when its water is denied to Bhim, people not friendly to Dalits become roaring animals, sticks become the bodies of the violence-makers, crawling snakes the railways and above all these is the depiction of Ambedkar's KamathiBaug experience. The ingenuity of the artists draws people playing, sitting, reading, exercising in Ambedkar's face which has turned to a public garden. The ecological affinity of the Pardhan Gond Art humanizes the objects--- here, the train becomes a snake, the feet of Dalits turn to birds, the intimidating fort becomes a lion. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receive Bhim Ambedkar is not conveyed through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. An earthmover used by a Dalit, who is killed for digging a well, shedstear as two cows bear witness. Even the speech balloons are designed to function as metaphors. Unlike the disengaged textboxes of comics here the speech balloons become an integral part of the graphic medium. Following the intricate gond style bird speech balloons are used for characters who belong to the Dalit community and whose "speech is soft". Scorpion's sting like speech balloons used for characters who love caste, whose words contain poison, "whose touch is poisonous". The thought balloons instead of using the conventional cloud style are represented through mind's eye. The artists explain "thinking happens in mind's eye. [These balloons therefore] contain words that cannot be heard but can be perceived".

All these font style, metaphors etc. are inspired by gond art style whose first worldly recognized artist been Jangarh Singh Shyam. The book begins with a tribute to this legendary figure. He started the Pardhan Gond Art Movement in the mid-1990s. He was originally from a remote village of Madhya Pradesh, from where he journeyed to Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, and later to Pompidou in Paris and the Mithila Museum in Nilgata, rural Japan. Pardhan Gond is a clan belongs to the larger Gond tribal community in central India. Through their singular art practice, they preserve the tradition and heritage of the Gond community. After Jangarh's death his art became more influential and more artists came to seek a livelihood as professional visual artists, including Durgabai and Subhash Vyam. The exploitation of the artists is sure to be noted. E.g. When Jangarh did suicide in the age of 40 he was working in an alienated space for Rs. 12,000 only. The Mithila Museum of Japan is itself a statue of exploitation ---- the Madhubani painters whose

animated paintings inspired the building of the museum were neglected and the museum turned to a lucrative business by Hasegawa, the founder of the Mithila Museum. Thus goes the humiliation and exploitation that Ambedkar faced in his day.

## VI. COLOUR AND CASTE

The critical literacy of *Bhimayana* as a post-modern and post-colonial text has been much more enhanced by the use of vibrant colours in this graphic novel. Colours help us to look at the text from the artists' viewpoint who are adivasis and experienced a historical disadvantage comparable to the 'untouchable' lower castes. In the book four "The Art of Bhimayana" we are told how the artists themselves faced discrimination in the production of the very book. They were called yokels by an urban woman who paid no attention to the international recognition of the artists when mentioned by the editor S.Anand. This incident reminds us of Ambedkar's Baroda days where despite his education he was denied the civil citizenship in the city.

In this last chapter the artists Subhas and Durgabai tells us how gond art is produced. The gond people believes that every element in nature, be it hills, sky or trees are sacred and has close connection to each other. In the time of festival, the artists would draw on the walls of their home. They mostly draw birds, animals and mythic beasts. In every ritual, their paintings try to depict the relation between man and nature. The colour palette of gond art is also a boon of nature. For white colour they use white soil available in the month of January in the Barendra Jungle. The yellow soil of Amarkantaka hill serves as yellow colour. They preserve dark black soil of their 'Ghar ka Matta' and for colour red they go to nearby Dhooti jungle to collect its soil. Throughout season they extract these colours from nature. The ecological circle thus becomes a full when they use natural colours to paint the nature around them.

*Bhimayana* however is painted in acrylic colours which stand as supplementary to the natural colours found in the environment. Each colour, along with their significance in gond art also used as meaningful metaphors in the text. E.g., colour orange is used for courage, ochre and brown to signify arid earth, green for fertile land and blue signifies life-giving water. Although colour black and white vary throughout, they are well balanced in general, such that every colour page includes some black and white while simultaneously causing readers to recognize the importance of particular story elements, such as climactic moments where Ambedkar's words build upon the

narrative. The use of dots and dashes enhances the details and the uniqueness of their art.

The book opens with the portrait of Jangarh Singh Shyam who is painted in abundance of colours and animals. Fishes are seen in the red land, troubling out of water along with other animals like cows, crocodiles and birds. A man is seen floating in the blue water and other man seen tilling the ground, thus making the barren land a fertile field. A green path followed to the water signifying a link between the water and the tilled land. It signifies as if only a few people have access in the water and the farming field while other humans are not even regarded as human but turned to animals and are caged in the red-orange droughty land--- who are denied water and also habitable green field. The painting brushes in the hands of the artist are his weapons which he uses to fight against this discrimination, and creates a blue pool to quench his thirst through his revolutionary act of painting. The epitaph under the image of Jangarh Singh Shyam reads; “The sky that sheltered us” --- this has aligned the artist with Ambedkar. He is shown as the revolutionary figure who has brought a change in the life of Gond artists like Ambedkar had brought a change in the life of outcaste people. The body of Jangarh Singh Shyam is the body of a community where alternate histories are written. This is the graphic dissonance that is used to subvert and diffuse the histories written in interest of the nation (Figure 8).

The colours convey atrocities and segregation that the Dalits have to face throughout their life. In page 22, the page is divided in two colour pattern --- orange and green. In the green section there is a blue bodied water (again strengthening the relation between water and the well-developed green land) where animals are drinking, but a Dalit boy is seen sitting in the desert-like orange field. The text reads, “...beasts at the trough, may drink till they burst. But the village turns to desert when I try to quench my thirst.” In the previous page the Dalit boy is seen travelling in the green field which suggests a Dalit can live in the society as long as he abides by the rule of uppercaste people and allows himself to be oppressed by them but as soon as he claims for his rights he is debarred from society (Figure 9). Thus, colour is used to remark at the caste-based discrimination of society.

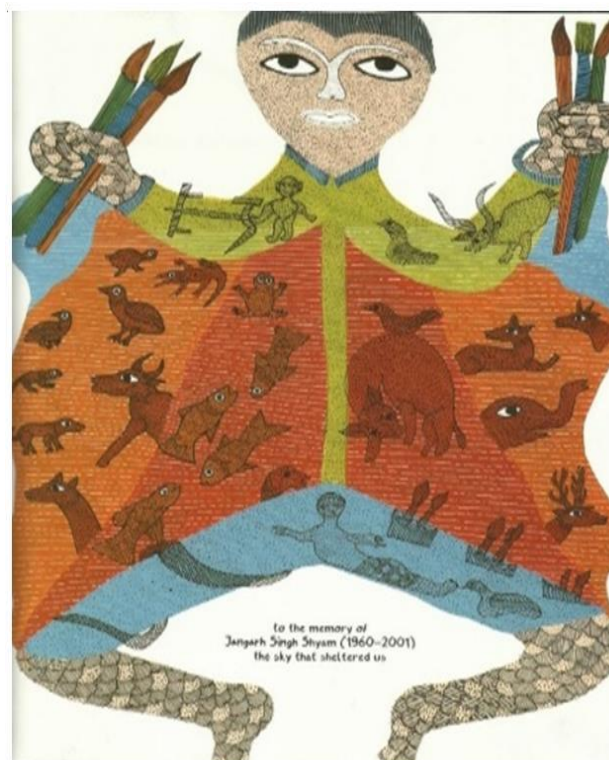


Fig 8: Vyam 5

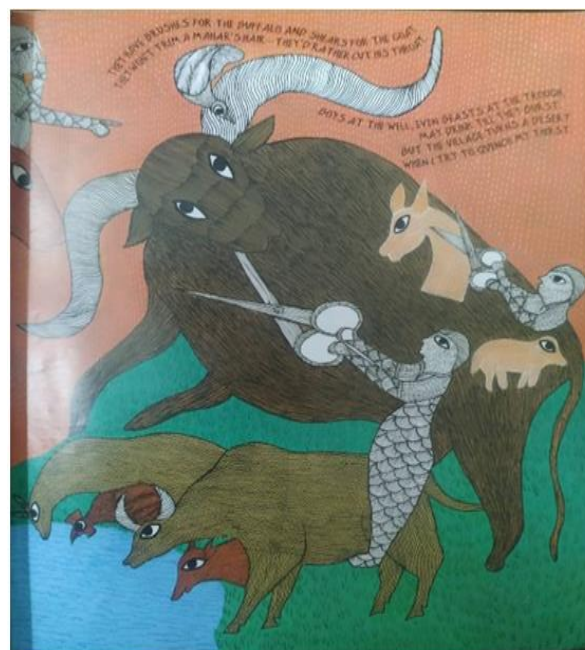


Fig 9: Vyam 23





Fig 10: *Vyam 63*

That the Dalits are always ghettoed even in an open space is depicted in page 27, where people of various castes are walking in the land but the Dalits are caged in the orange field while others travel in a less harsh field. The ultimate thirst of the Dalits for a better and greener land is never missed--- even when they choose a drink, they ask for the green ones knowing that it will be expensive for them.

Such segregations in the name of caste are present throughout the text. In page 32 the otherwise green forest turns to intimidating orange when Dalit boys travel in train. The ultimate segregation portrayed in the train journey of Ambedkar from Bombay to Baroda in 1917. The train coaches are painted with various colours which foregrounds multiple histories and perspectives of India and shows how Dalit perspectives are always enclaved in the archive of national history. The Brahmin and Ambedkar is in the same coach but the engulfing and unmitigable distance between them is strikingly visible. (Figure 10).

This rhetoric of colour continues in Book 3 “Travel” where an amalgamation of various colours like green, orange, brown, yellow, blue, pink, purple, ochre depicts the diversity of Indian society based on caste, religion, culture etc. This caste-ridden society has no place for the Dalits who are always marginalized and whose

bird-soft voices are doomed under the pressure of stiff stinging of scorpions.

## VII. COLOUR POLITICS

The political connotations of the colours should also be analyzed. E.g., colour blue is associated with the Dalit resistance. Ambedkar is known to have introduced blue flag for his party flag for the independent labor party. It is representative of identifying with Dalit consciousness that is non-discriminatory. Blue is also the colour of the sky – a representation of non-discrimination and also of water that signifies freshness, energy, positivity and power. In the text blue color is used in respect to Dalit’s thirst. In the title page of the chapter “Water” little Bhim dressed in blue struggles to reach a blue tubewell to quench the thirst of his inner fish. Blue, that stands for water has long been denied to the Dalits. The Dalits are first seen accessing the blue water after the enlivening Mahad speech of Ambedkar which been described with abundant use of colour blue and orange. Thus, access to blue water is a significant victory of the Dalits.

Saffron colour long stands for Hinduism. In the text this colour is used to suggest a claustrophobic place. This place marginalizes the Dalits and the Dalits need courage to stand against the discrimination they face everyday in the name of sacred Hindu religion. In the book, the articles of Manu Smriti are written in saffron box. The pointing fingers points to the futility of the antidotes of Manu Smriti. The events of Brahmins purifying water and the Ambedkarites burning the Manu Smriti are also described within the same box. That these two events taking place within the same box suggests that Dalits are becoming well-equipped to stand against the injustice of Hindus. Significantly in page 82 the anecdote Ambedkar shares with his fellow travelers about Dalit oppression is also in the saffron box. Thus, colour saffron remain in the book as a mark of Dalit oppression. This political appropriation of colours adds yet another texture to the visual literacy of the text which helps to see *Bhimayana* from another standpoint.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The ingenuity of *Bhimayana* is its use of folk paintings to tell the story of Ambedkar’s life and struggle for freedom of the Dalits. Instead of depending on the verbal literacy the book represents the caste conflict in Indian society through visual literacy. With its ‘antique’ art, subversion of form, and the visual vocabulary of atrocity and social inequality, it offers a different voice – the cultural legibility and legitimacy – to the language of oppression

and rights. The political connotation of colours, forms and pattern is an important weapon used in the text against the injustice of Hindu social orders. It helps to start propagating a counter hegemonic discourse of the Dalits by interrogating the curriculum and discipline of upper-class system which cleverly excludes the anti-caste philosophers such as Jotirao Phule and Ambedkar from its History book. The artists took shelter in the paratexts of images for they knew words cannot do everything. They “lack the immediate emotional charge of pictures, relying instead on a gradual cumulative effect.” (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 135) The graphic form demands a critical visual literacy in the readers which is an anterior moment to a larger reformatting of the public space through the production, dissemination and consumption of such stories.

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